VOICES OF THE UNINVITED
Matthew 22:1-10
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Queen Elizabeth II visited Lexington, Kentucky last week and nobody refused an invitation to dinner. In fact, the dinners and teas were small. Invitations were treasured. Guest lists were carefully prepared and painfully reduced. No one sent regrets when the Queen came to Lexington.

But that's exactly what happened in a parable Jesus told one time about a king who invited people to a banquet to celebrate his son's marriage. People being people, and royalty being royalty, one would assume that the announcement that the king was having a grand dinner party would set off the same hoping and anticipating and social excitement that the news told us was epidemic in Blue Grass country last week. Not so. These guests wouldn't come. The king sent another invitation. They were too busy, they said, and treated the king's messenger rudely at the same time. And so the king has these ungracious and unresponsive guests destroyed, and then does an incredible thing - opens the gates to the great hall and invites in the street people, whoever happened to be walking by. The uninvited came to the banquet and were welcomed by the king.

Throughout the First Gospel Jesus is engaged in a series of running verbal skirmishes with the religious authorities on the topic of who is in God's kingdom and who isn't. The Scribes and Pharisees were scandalized by his openness, by his view that God was most interested in the unwanted, the outsiders. They were offended by his refusal to play by the accepted rules of society. He kept associating with, eating with, living with people who were not up to their standards. This story uses one of their favorite images of God's kingdom...the banquet table. It is a rich Hebrew metaphor. In Isaiah 25, God's promise to his people is expressed in wonderful images of a generous and very happy feast with a table laden with good food and drink. Jesus takes that powerful metaphor, turns it inside out, has the proper, invited guests miss the feast because of their own boorishness, and fills the hall with anyone who happens to be walking by.

That kind of thing got him in trouble. Clearly one of the most consistent motifs in his life, was his inclusiveness or his unwillingness to abide by the exclusive structures in his society. He said and did the unthinkable - everytime he ate with the unclean, spent time with fishermen and tax collectors, talked with a prostitute. Jesus crossed the barriers his society had set in place to exclude people, and the early church at its best followed his example, tearing down walls which separated Jew from Greek, slave from free person, man from woman. "All" they learned to say "are one in Christ."

Christian baptism was originally a radical, revolutionary practice because it did not differentiate between men and women, male babies and female babies. The older Jewish rite of entrance and covenant, circumcision, was for males. Baptism paid no attention to gender and the Gospel, from the beginning has been strongly inclusive, egalitarian and in judgment of every societal structure which is not. Christians are not and cannot be very comfortable with any form of exclusivism.

On the other hand the text is very encouraging to those who understand themselves to be on the outside generally looking in. The most vigorously debated theology of the day is being written from the point of view of the outsiders. It is called Liberation Theology, and it has a distinct Central and South American flavor to it. Instead of the cerebral texts written at Yale, Harvard and Chicago, Liberation Theology is done from the bottom up, in base communities, small groups of peasant Christians, who meet together and with startling honesty use the words of scripture as a way to understand their own lives. They are the poor, the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the victims who have no power, no voice. When the parable is read at a secret base community meeting in Central America, the people know who the invited guests who don't show up are. And they know themselves to be the uninvited who end up welcomed at the king's table, and for them - the uninvited - the parable is the source of great comfort and hope.

I hear in this text, inspiration for the kind of a city church we are trying to be. In a recent Christian Century the Episcopal Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, wrote, "The city reflects the wide variety of human experience - a variety of race, national background and life style. Building a cohesive community out of that diversity is a primary urban need which the church, simply by being there, helps to meet." I thought of that observation as I watched the wonderful diversity of the people who came to the opening of the art exhibit here Wednesday evening. If God's kingdom is as diverse and inclusive as Jesus taught that it was, gatherings like that point to it, testify to it and celebrate its brief appearance rather eloquently, I think. The Bishop observed: "In the city, the church's presence as a universal community proclaims the kingdom of God, made up of people who come from all four corners of the earth, as well as the least of these, our brothers and sisters." (Christian Century, September 12-19, 1984, p. 829-830, John Shelby Sprung, "The Urban Church, Symbol and Reality")

The text asks us to be here, I believe, with our doors open to the street, and our arms - God's arms - wide open to any who would enter.

The text asks an accounting, I believe, of the church on the topic of inclusiveness. Now that is neither an easy nor a popular subject. Anthropologists teach us that the "tribe" is a common, historic and necessary structure of civilization. The tribe by nature is exclusive and tells the individuals in it who they are by drawing a circle, or building a wall around them. Tribes give a sense of identity with shared stories and rituals and customs. Tribal behavior is expressed at family reunions when the old stories begin, and by fraternities and sororities. The "tribe" exists at high school pep rallies, Ohio State football games, and Olympic crowds chanting "USA, USA." Sometimes the church becomes tribe. When belligerent Protestants and angry Roman Catholics participate in the weekend parades in the streets of Derry commemorating religious wars three centuries ago, religion and tribalism are seen in tragic combination. Ordinarily it is neither that overt nor that intentional. One of the built-in problems with denominations in the United States is that they become exclusive - sociologically, economically, sometimes racially. The text asks us to monitor ourselves always in order to avoid the sin of exclusivism. It asks the church to do something the church does not find it easy to do, namely to listen to the voices of those who perceive themselves to be uninvited and excluded. The issues today are the difficult ones: minorities,

equal opportunity, affirmative action: women's issues, exclusive/inclusive language, sexual preference and life style issues. Jesus told a story about God's kingdom which was radically inclusive. No one was left out who wanted to be in.

The first word from the parable can be a hard one. To sit here in this sanctuary, most of us safe, secure, comfortable, is to identify with the privileged guests who don't show - and soon it is to feel guilt about those who we exclude. But in the middle of my reflection and reading this week I heard another word - a word of grace. Presbyterian author and preacher Frederick Buechner wrote about an experience everyone has had, or can understand. He had spent a cold and harrowing day in New York and, along the way had been exposed to the rawness and cruelty of life as it is for the street people on 42nd Street. As the day wore one he longed to be home - safe, secure, warm. And as he imagined that haven, with the people he loved most waiting for him, dinner in the oven, a fire in the woodstove, he began to feel guilty, the same guilt sensitive, middle class Christians feel when they hear this story. But he reflected: "Warmth. Light. Peace. Stillness. Love. That was what I felt. And as I entered that room where they were present, it seemed to me that wherever these things are found in the world, they should not be the cause for guilt but treasured, nurtured, sheltered from the darkness that threatens them." (A Room Called Remember, p. 105)

Perhaps the message here is at least mixed. The parable, after all, is very good news if you perceive yourself among the uninvited. It is judgment for the invited guests who didn't show, but it is amazing grace for the ones walking by, minding their own business, who know they aren't on the select list, but nevertheless suddenly find themselves guests of honor at the king's table. One of the mission priorities of the Presbyterian Church at this time and place, it seems to me, is to balance those segments of the church which seem to know precisely the names on the guest list at the heavenly banquet; to remind all that this is a complicated little vignette the point of which may be lost entirely if we think we know who's invited and who isn't: who's in and who's out. Maybe - just maybe - the grace is here for us too. Maybe some of the people on the guest list didn't come because they didn't think they were good enough. Perhaps some eliminated themselves from this celebration out of some deep sense that they did not belong at the table of the king. Perhaps there is more grace here than meets the eye - which is the way grace often is.

Our best analysts, our most profound theologians - from St. Paul, St. Augustine, to John Calvin, and Karl Barth have agreed that the basic human dilemma is an inability to deal with grace. Invited to the banquet as guest, we want to know that we deserve to be there. We'd like to buy our own ticket. Our sin is pride, all those theologians agree, and pride can both make us feel better about ourselves than we ought, but it can also make us incapable of receiving grace, love, acceptance. Conversion, the late Paul Tillich taught, is "accepting the fact that I am accepted by that which is greater than I."

One of our deepest fears is that we will not be acceptable. Sigmund Freud broke through to new possibilities for mental health when he understood that feelings of inadequacy and guilt begin with every infant's fear of rejection by parents. Infants, Freud proposed, are profoundly influenced by losing parental love. It

was a Swiss psychiatrist, Paul Tournier, who took that basic kernel of Freudianism and sat it beside what the theologians from St. Paul had been saying about us and concluded that deep within most of us, perhaps all of us, is that same fear - that God, our heavenly parent, will withhold acceptance, security, love. Rejection of any kind is one of the most devastating human experiences: the Pro-baseball player treated without ceremony, the executive pushed upstairs, the professional whose job is eliminated, the lover jilted, the politician defeated. Perhaps our basic spiritual dilemma then is not so much that we don't believe in God, or don't have time for church, but that we can't comprehend the Good News that we are accepted. Perhaps our basic dilemma is that we can't comprehend a grace that amazing, a love that accepting, arms open that wide.

Harvard theologian Harvey Cox, who writes very learnedly, in a rare autobiographical note, recalls his own spiritual journey. It began in a small Baptist Church in Malvern, Pennsylvania. He remembers as a boy singing "Just As I Am" during the weekly altar call.

"Though the words may sound lachrymose to many, for me they still convey a sense of comfort and assurance. Was it really true that I could enter the presence of the Most High, Just As I Am? If true, that was very good news to an adolescent who was always being reminded - or so it seemed to me - of my shortcomings and defects. I was never good at football or basketball. Someone else played the saxophone better. Most of the girls preferred other guys.

"God accepted me Just As I Am. That was Good News! Years later when I read Paul Tillich's famous sermon, 'You Are Accepted,' I knew exactly what it meant, and I could hear the melody of the old hymn still humming on in the back of my mind." (Just As I Am, p. 152)

Jesus told a story once about a banquet...and about guests who tragically missed it, but also about uninvited guests who miraculously, amazingly, wonderfully found themselves welcomed at the king's table!

There is no more futile task than trying to determine why people come to church. Only those who don't attend seem to know, and after years of hearing those reasons, I have respectfully concluded that they are mostly wrong. We don't come here any longer because it's the thing to do. That day is long over. Nor do we come to be seen, or because it will help business. And most of us have grown theologically beyond an image of God as celestial accountant, keeping a record of our attendance in the book. I'm really not much interested in the project of inquiring - but I do now know that the reasons are not far from that banquet table of the king - at which we do not feel worthy to sit. I do know now that rejection of any kind is devastating and that when it comes into life with its almost unspeakable pain, the Good News of a God - who with open arms accepts us - is the most amazing grace. I do know now that the reasons are not far from a table at which we are welcome, where we are wanted, accepted guests, and a king who opens the doors to all who would come. I do know now that it has, ultimately to do with grace, and as Buechner wrote it: "Warmth and Light and Peace and Stillness and Love and the fact that wherever they are found in this world they are to be treasured, nurtured, and sheltered from the darkness that threatens them."

To the God of all grace, who calls you to share God's eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever! Amen.